

## Presidential Power in Putin's Third Term: Was Crimea a Critical Juncture in Domestic Politics?

Burkhardt, Fabian

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FABIAN BURKHARDT

## PRESIDENTIAL POWER IN PUTIN'S THIRD TERM: WAS CRIMEA A CRITICAL JUNCTURE IN DOMESTIC POLITICS?

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 marked a watershed in international law and politics. It caused, as the political scientist Richard Sakwa puts it, "the most dangerous confrontation since the end of the Cold War, if not since the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962."<sup>1</sup> At the time, even seasoned analysts were unsure what this watershed might entail. Writing shortly afterwards, the political scientist Andrew Wilson struggled over whether it meant an "immediate end to the post-Cold War order. Or, like the original Crimean War in the 1850s, it might mark the beginning of a transition to something else."<sup>2</sup>

### DID CRIMEA MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN DOMESTIC POLITICS?

While the argument that the first land grab since the end of the World War II in Europe marks an international caesura is straightforward, the assessment of its meaning for domestic politics in Russia demands a closer look. Beyond the obvious observation that Russia (*de facto*, not *de jure*) incorporated Crimea and the city of Sevastopol into its federal system, many aspects of Russian

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<sup>1</sup> R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2015, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup> A. Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West*, New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2014, p. 205.

politics were affected. After Crimea, those who had participated in the diverse, anti-government “Bolotnaya” protest movement of 2011–2012 were split over how to respond to Russia’s actions in Ukraine; subsequent subnational elections in Russian regions grew even less competitive; independent media increasingly came under pressure; and the “politics of fear”<sup>3</sup> was applied against potential challengers of the official policy. This tendency led Vladimir Gel’man to conclude that the Ukraine crisis should be viewed as a “trigger event that accelerated the Kremlin’s existing trend when it came to changing the domestic political agenda.”<sup>4</sup>

This combination of continuity and accelerated change after Crimea sparked divergent assessments of Russia’s regime type. While Gel’man sees an increased militarization and personalism, he still puts the Russian regime in a bracket of electoral authoritarianism, citing its regular multi-party elections.<sup>5</sup> In the view of Lev Gudkov, one of Russia’s leading sociologists, state media and social media are both used as an instrument of propaganda to manipulate public opinion: Crimea, in this respect, marked a return to Soviet paradigms and even a “relapse into totalitarianism.”<sup>6</sup> Kirill Rogov, an independent analyst and former senior research fellow at the Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy, and Nikolay Petrov, a professor at Moscow’s Higher School of Economics, take Gel’man’s argument about regime personalization and deinstitutionalization a step further. In Putin’s 3<sup>rd</sup> term between 2012 and 2016,<sup>7</sup> they believe, the regime has transitioned from a form of “corporatism” to “sultanism.”<sup>8</sup> In sum, those authors adhering to cross-national regime type classifications tend to

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<sup>3</sup> V. Gel’man, “The Politics of Fear: How Russia’s Rulers Counter Their Rivals,” *Russian Politics* 1, no. 1 (2016), pp. 27–45.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> L. Gudkov, “Putin’s Relapse into Totalitarianism,” in: *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?*, Houndmills–Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 86–109.

<sup>7</sup> The next presidential elections are slated for the 18 March 2018, the 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the annexation of Crimea.

<sup>8</sup> K. Rogov, N. Petrov, “Ispolnitel’naya vlast’ i silovyye korporatsii,” in: *Politicheskoe razvitie Rossii. 2014–2016: Instituty i praktiki avtoritarnoy konsolidatsii*, ed. K. Rogov, Moscow: Fond “Liberal’naya Missiya,” 2016, pp. 133–153.

argue that Russia has remained within the same regime type of electoral authoritarianism or personalist dictatorship. Others who focus on changes over time from a non-comparative, longitudinal perspective seem to stress the qualitative changes Russia has undergone after Crimea. In this chapter, I first argue that a before/after analysis of Crimea as a potential critical juncture in domestic politics can be a useful research design for this purpose. In the following sections, I divide several key dimensions of presidential power such as approval ratings, appointment and dismissal powers, repression, and presidential legislative success in periods before and after Crimea to assess the effect of this “external shock.” The conclusion summarizes the findings: Crimea caused a “rally around the leader” effect both in terms of presidential approval ratings and legislative activity, and thus contributed to a more pronounced personalist form of authoritarian governance, but other key regime characteristics remained in place. Crimea was thus both a trigger and an accelerator for domestic politics and presidential power in particular. On the other hand, slow-moving, more inert features allow the Russian regime to adapt to external challenges, but also make wholesale changes even in the face of major external shocks improbable.

#### A BEFORE-AFTER ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER: CRIMEA AS CRITICAL JUNCTURE?

This chapter aims to tackle this ambiguity of continuity and change in domestic politics by employing a “before-after” research design<sup>9</sup> to assess presidential power in Vladimir Putin's 3<sup>rd</sup> term. A single, longitudinal case—i.e. Putin's 3<sup>rd</sup> presidential term—is divided into two sub-cases with the annexation of Crimea as the dividing line. If presidential power significantly differs before and after this alleged watershed, one could argue that Crimea also marked a critical juncture in domestic politics. Critical junctures arise in periods

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<sup>9</sup> A.L. George, A. Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 167–167.

of crisis and are seen to be produced by “generative cleavages”<sup>10</sup> such as Russia’s strained relations with the West. In the course of a relatively short window of opportunity “the range of plausible choices open to powerful political actors expands substantially and the consequences of their decisions for the outcome of interest are potentially much more momentous.”<sup>11</sup> The junctures are critical because in the aftermath it becomes increasingly difficult or even impossible to return to the *status quo ante*, and the previously available range of choices is narrowed down to the one path selected.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, change that ensues such critical junctures has to be significant, swift and encompassing.<sup>13</sup>

With the annexation of Crimea as an exogenous “shock” or “treatment”—brought upon Russia and the world by a small group of actors which reportedly included president Putin and the four officials Sergey Ivanov (head of the presidential administration), Nikolay Patrushev (Secretary of the Security Council), Alexandr Bortnikov (Director of the FSB), and Sergey Shoygu (Minister of Defense)<sup>14</sup>—a quasi-experimental design can be achieved by holding a maximum of potential factors constant across these two sub-cases before and after.

Several challenges arise with this kind of research design. Two stand out: First, oftentimes more than one variable changes at a time making causal inference complicated. The annexation and the subsequent conflict between Russia and Western states triggered several waves of sanctions by the EU, the U.S. as well as other countries with increasing intensity, and counter-sanctions imposed by Russia in August 2014 as a response to the second sanctions wave launched by Western countries after the downing of the Malaysian airliner MH17. According to some computations,

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<sup>10</sup> J. Hogan, “Remoulding the Critical Junctures Approach,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 3 (2006), pp. 657–679.

<sup>11</sup> G. Capoccia, R.D. Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007), p. 343.

<sup>12</sup> J. Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 4 (2000), pp. 507–548.

<sup>13</sup> J. Hogan, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> M. Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men: The Four Metamorphoses of Vladimir Putin*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2016.

"1.97% of the GDP quarter-on-quarter growth is estimated to be lost due to sanctions by Russia."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the collapse of the oil price in the second half of 2014 until early 2015 was a further shock to Russia's energy-dependent economy. Not only did this mean a significant decrease of revenues for Russia's state budget, but also the ruble lost more than 50% of its value against the U.S. dollar, a slump that needs to be attributed precisely to the oil price shock, and not sanctions.<sup>16</sup> Due to these harsh environmental factors, Russia's GDP shrank by 3.7% in 2015, but only 0.9% in 2016 and is expected to grow in 2017 again. Over the years, Russia managed to adapt to these circumstances due to the "government's policy response package of a flexible exchange rate policy, expenditure cuts in real terms, and bank recapitalization—along with tapping the Reserve Fund."<sup>17</sup> Hence, proximity to the "trigger event" in March 2014 might indicate in how far domestic developments are related to the critical juncture under review, nevertheless the confluence of the mentioned confounding factors (land grab, sanctions, oil price shock and slump in budget revenues) call for caution in terms of attribution of single causes.

Second, to gauge how significant and encompassing a critical juncture is the size of the window of opportunity matters. Depending on the demand for change directed at leaders, the freedom of action enjoyed by these leaders and the magnitude of the "rally round the flag" moment, windows could be micro or macro.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, "even when political systems as a whole face 'unsettled times', many institutions may remain unaffected."<sup>19</sup> There is little doubt that the annexation of Crimea was a swift event. Daniel Treisman even described it as a chaotic muddling through, where the

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<sup>15</sup> K.A. Kholodilin, A. Netsunayev, "Crimea and Punishment: The Impact of Sanctions on Russian and European Economies," *Deutsches Institut Für Wirtschaftsforschung Discussion Papers*, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Dreger et al., "Between the Hammer and the Anvil: The Impact of Economic Sanctions and Oil Prices on Russia's Ruble," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 44, no. 2 (2016), pp. 295–308.

<sup>17</sup> World Bank, "Russia Economic Report. The Russian Economy Inches Forward," *The World Bank Russia Economic Report*, no. 36, November 2016, [www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/publication/rer](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/publication/rer).

<sup>18</sup> A.P. Cortell, S. Peterson, "Altered States: Explaining Domestic Institutional Change," *British Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 1 (1999), pp. 177–203.

<sup>19</sup> G. Capoccia, R.D. Kelemen, op.cit., p. 347.

political events “revealed an almost farcical lack of preparation.”<sup>20</sup> Putin, according to Treisman, showed himself “ready to gamble at moments of high tension, taking actions that were both highly risky and hard to reverse.”<sup>21</sup> The idea of irreversibility already attests to a new path taken with Crimea. Nevertheless, in how far this change was all-encompassing for presidential power, one central aspect of domestic politics, needs further investigation. This is because in theory it is conceivable that for example Putin’s popularity was bolstered in the long-term, but party politics or relations between the center of power and the regions remained relatively unaltered.

Presidential power notoriously is a fuzzy concept without a universally accepted, clear-cut definition. For the purpose of this chapter I propose to scrutinize those aspects of presidential power and activism that received broad attention after the annexation and were thought to be affected in the aftermath, in particular presidential approval ratings, appointment and dismissal powers, the fight against corruption and repression, as well as presidential success in the Duma.

#### PRESIDENTIAL POPULARITY AND LEGITIMACY: CRIMEA CHANGED—AND ACCELERATED—EVERYTHING

High presidential approval ratings in Russia are a crucial power resource for presidents to show other political actors—such as the government, the parliament or business—that their own political course taken is perceived to be on the right path by the broader population. But ratings can also signal to potential counter-elites that rebellion is futile, due to large-scale popular support. As Russia’s political system is president-centered, presidential approval is also a crucial aspect of regime legitimacy in general.

Russian pollsters have conducted opinion surveys on presidential popularity since the early 1990s, and the overall finding

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<sup>20</sup> D. Treisman, “Crimea: Anatomy of a Decision,” *Russia Political Insight*, 26 August 2016, p. 13, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55510affe4b06afeca50df07/t/57d3917e3e00be430c4c5b4e/1473483134670/Crimea+FINAL+Aug+26.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

about presidential approval in the last quarter century is that Yeltsin kicked off his presidency with 81% approval in 1991 with the rating plummeting into the single digits by the end of his 2<sup>nd</sup> term while Putin kicked off his 1<sup>st</sup> term in the early 2000s with approval ratings between 60% and 80%. Treisman showed that public perceptions of economic performance best explain this glaring difference between presidents Yeltsin and Putin.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Putin's ratings were continuously subsiding from well-above 80% in 2008 to record low 63% in 2012 when the global financial crisis and Russia's structural reform deficit hit the economy, and, in turn, public perception. The regime successfully managed the *rokirovka*—the power transfer from Medvedev back to Putin in 2012—and then saw off the street protests in the aftermath of this *rokirovka* as well as falsified parliamentary elections in 2011. But the economy, and hence presidential approval, did not pick up again.

However, as Sergey Guriev noted, Russia's intervention in Crimea in early 2014 "changed everything."<sup>23</sup> Already by March 2014, Putin's rating had jumped back to over 80%, and in October both VCIOM and independent Levada reported 89% approval. The magnitude of this "Crimean consensus effect"<sup>24</sup> was not unfamiliar to the Putin administration: The Kremlin had experienced before how military campaigns such as the Second Chechen War after 1999, the five day war with Georgia or international disagreement with the United States, such as after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, can significantly help boost presidential popularity. Much more consequential than the mere "rally around the flag effect" and the already proverbial 86% approval was that Crimea helped to decouple presidential popularity ratings from the well-being of the Russian economy. It was not the perception about expected improvement of future public and personal welfare that led Russians to rally round their president: The main drivers became Russia's improved international standing in the world. This was done through Putin showing off Russia's defense capabilities and

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<sup>22</sup> D. Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (2011), pp. 590–609.

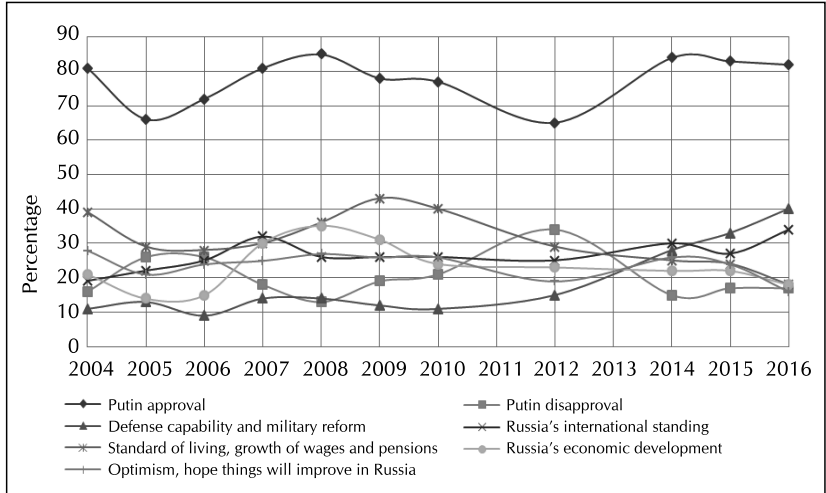
<sup>23</sup> S. Guriev, "In Russia, It's Not the Economy, Stupid," *The New York Times*, 25 December 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/12/25/opinion/in-russia-its-not-the-economy-stupid.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/25/opinion/in-russia-its-not-the-economy-stupid.html).

<sup>24</sup> See Ben Noble's chapter in this volume on the Crimean consensus and legislative politics.



reformed military—both to its people and to the world—with a *tour de force* first in Ukraine, and later in Syria.

Figure 1. Approval of Vladimir Putin and answers to open questions about Putin’s main achievements between 2004 and 2016



Source: Compiled by the author with data from [levada.ru](http://levada.ru) and a data set provided by Stepan Goncharov: <https://infogr.am/2e301a41-6d1e-4a8a-95c1-cd4c2ce98977>.

Figure 1 shows that until 2009, Russians primarily considered Putin’s main achievement to be rising living standards through wage growth and secure pension plans. Russians approved of Putin because they associated him with the country’s wider economic development. Another reason Russians approved of Putin back then was that he gave Russians reasons to be optimistic about the future. While Russia’s international standing became an important aspect of Putin’s approval already by the mid-2000s, Russians had shifted their focus onto defense and military capabilities only in 2014, when 28% said these were Putin’s main achievements. By 2016, the reversal of this larger trend had been cemented: for a majority, Russia’s military and international standing now comes first, and economy and welfare have been pushed into second place when assessing the main achievements of their president. Hence, for presidential popularity, and for regime legitimacy as a whole, Crimea was both an accelerator and trigger at once.

## PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENT AND DISMISSAL POWERS

Appointment and dismissal powers are certainly among the most significant ways a president can steer political processes. In most general terms, presidents face a dilemma: appoint loyal, ideologically close officials from their patronage networks, or guarantee competence and performance through a more meritocratic choice. In Russia, it is usually assumed that preference is given to loyalty over competence<sup>25</sup> although meritocratic elements also exist.<sup>26</sup> A second crucial aspect is the frequency with which these appointments occur. Since the mid-2000s a system of cadre rotation has been in place,<sup>27</sup> which regularly rotates outsiders into federal state organs and regional administrations<sup>28</sup> to prevent departmentalism and localism respectively. When presidents sack officials this is oftentimes perceived as a purge or a weakness of the president as these subordinates allegedly cannot be trusted anymore. On the other hand, regular cadre rotation can also be assessed as a “feature of administrative centralization”<sup>29</sup> and state formation. Moreover, regular rotation has been found to be conducive to coup-proofing—i.e. by preventing vested interests from coordination and rebellion against the autocrat.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> O.J. Reuter, G.B. Robertson, “Subnational Appointments in Authoritarian Regimes: Evidence from Russian Gubernatorial Appointments,” *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012), pp. 1023–1037.

<sup>26</sup> V. Gimpelson, V. Magun, R.J. Brym, “Hiring and Promoting Young Civil Servants: Weberian Ideals versus Russian Reality,” in: *Russian Bureaucracy and the State: Officialdom from Alexander III to Vladimir Putin*, ed. E. Huskey, D.K. Rowney, Springer, 2009, pp. 231–252.

<sup>27</sup> E. Huskey, “Legacies and Departures in the Russian State Executive,” in: *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. M.R. Beissinger, S. Kotkin, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 111–127.

<sup>28</sup> M. Rochlitz et al., “Performance Incentives and Economic Growth: Regional Officials in Russia and China,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 4 (2015), pp. 421–445.

<sup>29</sup> D. Siegel, “The Political Logic of Cadre Rotation in Post-Soviet Central Asia,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 4 April 2017, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> S. Chestnut Greitens, “Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence,” *Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute*, Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

In the following, I will review presidential appointment patterns in the presidential administration, the government, federal districts and regions.

PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION

Two major appointments made waves in 2016: in August, the *silovik* heavy-weight Sergey Ivanov was replaced by the young technocrat Anton Vayno as new head of the presidential administration (PA).<sup>31</sup> Later in October, Rosatom’s Sergey Kiriyenko became new head of the PA’s Domestic Politics Department as Vyacheslav Volodin was soon to be elected new chairman of the State Duma after United Russia’s landslide victory in the September parliamentary elections.

Table 1 shows all dismissals and appointments of top officials in the PA ranging from the head, deputy heads to department heads.

Table 1. Dismissals and appointments of high-ranking presidential administration officials compiled from presidential decrees

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total Dismissals	4	2	0	1	3
Total Appointments	22	5	1	1	4

What becomes clear is that the year 2016 was not so extraordinary after all. Several trends need to be noted: elections are important, in particular presidential elections. In the course of election campaigns, leading staff in the PA must be dismissed and reappointed, which explains the highest figure of 22 in 2012. Secondly, none of the dismissals can be classified as an explicit purge: all officials were transferred and reassigned to other positions. These new postings obviously could also be less prestigious, such as Sergey Ivanov’s move to special envoy for the environment, or the senate mandate given to the former head of the

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<sup>31</sup> F. Burkhardt, “Russia’s New Generation of Technocrats,” *Intersection*, 16 August 2016, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/politics/russias-new-generation-technocrats>.

Domestic Politics Department Oleg Morozov. (Senate mandates are often seen as a sinecure. Morozov left this post as well in 2015.) Thirdly, it is easily observed that in the period between the presidential elections of 2012 and the Duma elections of 2016, cadre decisions are idiosyncratic. In 2013, for example, Ksenia Yudayeva was promoted from the PA's Expert Department to Vice Chairman of Russia's Central Bank, Yudayeva was replaced by Vladimir Simonenko, who had been Deputy Minister of Economic Development. Also in 2013, a new department for the fight against corruption was created within the PA which was the result of a restructuring of the Department for State Service and Cadres, from which the new head Oleg Plokhoy was promoted.

Certainly, Vayno's style as head of the PA is less hands-on, more detached than their predecessors'—and the same goes for Kiriienko in his new role. Nevertheless, it will only be after the presidential elections in March 2018 when a definite judgment on their appointment strategy and governance style will be possible. So in sum, other factors besides Crimea are crucial for assessing cadre policy in the PA.

## GOVERNMENT

The same logic as with the PA applies to government ministers: the government lays down its mandate before presidential elections, and the president-elect appoints the new PM and cabinet ministers. In contrast to the 1990s, when cabinet reshuffles were frequent also in between presidential elections, in the 2000s cabinets usually remained relatively stable over the presidential terms, and ministers were replaced only on rare occasions.<sup>32</sup>

The government under Prime Minister Medvedev was installed on 21 May 2012 by presidential decree and consisted

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<sup>32</sup> G. Neyaskin, "Rasstrel'nye dolzhnosti: kak chasto rossiyskiye ministry ostayutsya bez raboty," *Republic.ru*, 1 September 2016, <https://republic.ru/app.php/posts/72647>; E. Semenova, "Russia. Cabinet Formation and Careers in a Super-Presidential System," in: *The Selection of Ministers around the World*, ed. K.M. Dowding, P. Dumont, *Routledge Research on Social and Political Elites* 5, London–New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 139–155.

of 21 ministers: seven of them had been replaced by the end of 2016. The Ministry of Economic Development experienced the highest turnover. In June 2013, Alexey Ulyukayev replaced Andrey Belousov who became economic advisor in the PA. In November 2016, Ulyukayev was arrested on corruption charges; his place was taken by the 1982-born Maxim Oreshkin. Already by November 2012, Minister of Defense Serdyukov was accused of embezzlement in the case of the MoD contractor Oboronservis, and was replaced by Sergey Shoygu. Beside these two exceptional cases, it was mainly the restructuring of the federal executive that affected appointment patterns. This concerned the upgraded Ministry for Utilities (ZhKKh) in 2013, and the creation of the Crimea Ministry in March 2014 and the North Caucasus Ministry in 2014. The Minister for Crimean Affairs Oleg Savelev remained in office for only 15 months—the ministry was liquidated in July 2015 after it had launched a 708 million ruble funding program for the peninsula, the management and supervision of which was subsequently transferred to the Economy ministry. Appointments of Alexandr Tkachev (Agriculture) in 2015, Olga Vasileva (Education) and Pavel Kolobkov (Sports) in 2016 attest to minor policy adjustments rather than larger reshuffles with the purpose of broader policy shifts. Vasileva, for example, was widely portrayed as an *ideocrat* who would give education an increasingly patriotic touch. Her main initiative in office, however, was to cut spending on education, something her “technocratic” predecessor Livanov had resisted. The abolishment of the Crimea ministry and the appointment of Tkachev—a staunch supporter of Russian counter-sanctions, import substitutions, and first and foremost his own agriculture business—suggest that already by mid-2015 Crimea and its management have been fully incorporated into the federal economic policy making routine. More importantly, in the case of the Ministry of Agriculture, Crimea did have a clear and persistent effect, while change at top of the Ministry of Education followed a different logic.

## PRESIDENTIAL REPRESENTATIVES AND GOVERNORS

A year later, on 28 July 2016 the Crimean Federal District—it had been created on 21 March 2014 and comprised the two subjects Crimea and Sevastopol—was abolished and incorporated into the Southern Federal District. Reducing the number of federal districts to seven again and thereby losing its special status, by mid-2016 also Crimean security and law enforcement related issues were managed in conjunction with other federal subjects of the Southern District. On the same day, in a “massive cadre reshuffle”<sup>33</sup> a total of 4 governors and 5 presidential representatives in federal districts (*polpredy*) were dismissed and appointed.

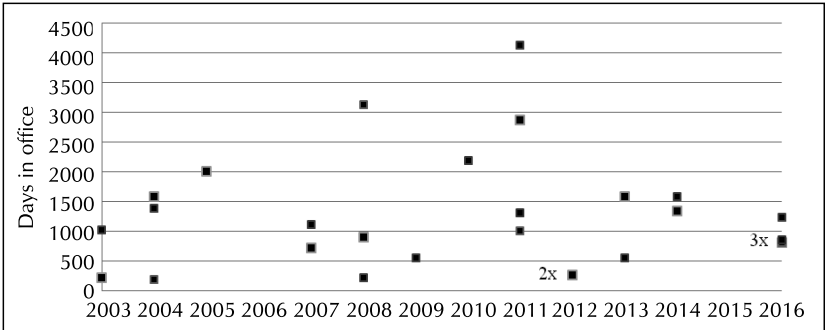
Was this reshuffle in any way unprecedented, and can we draw any inferences about a potential coup-proofing strategy, or an increased regime personalization after Crimea? Figures 2 and 3 present annual dismissal rates of *polpredy* and governors as well as exit fates of the latter. As the systematic overview of *polpredy* dismissals since their inception in 2000 shows, by the end of 2016 Putin has dismissed the same amount of envoys in his 3<sup>rd</sup> term as Medvedev during his presidency: nine each in total. In 2011, Medvedev also dismissed four *polpredy* in the course of four months, in particular the two long-time *polpredy* Poltavchenko (since 2000) and Klebanov (since 2003). In Putin's 3<sup>rd</sup> term *polpredy* would serve between three to four years, hence over time cadres were rotated more frequently than in the previous presidential terms. The exit fates of the *polpredy* dismissed in 2016 also attest to the cadre rotation principle at work: Vladimir Bulavin (North-Western) was appointed Head of the Federal Customs Service, Sergey Melikov (North Caucasian) became 1<sup>st</sup> Deputy Head of the National Guard with Oleg Belaventsev (Crimean) replacing him, Vladimir Ustinov was reappointed in the Southern Federal District now united with the Crimean District, and Nikolay Rogozhkin (Siberian) left state service as he reached retirement age with 65 years. The main difference to previous practice was that this occurred on one day

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<sup>33</sup> N. Raibman, “Putin provel masshtabnye kadrovye perestanki,” *Vedomosti*, no. 28, 2016, [www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2016/07/28/650900-glavnogo-tamozhennika](http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2016/07/28/650900-glavnogo-tamozhennika).

while earlier this would have been implemented over the course of several months. The following years will show whether this practice—which certainly demands more planning ahead from the PA—persists in the future.

Figure 2. Presidential representatives in federal districts (*polpredy*) dismissed per year (by days in office)



Source: compiled by the author based on presidential decrees.

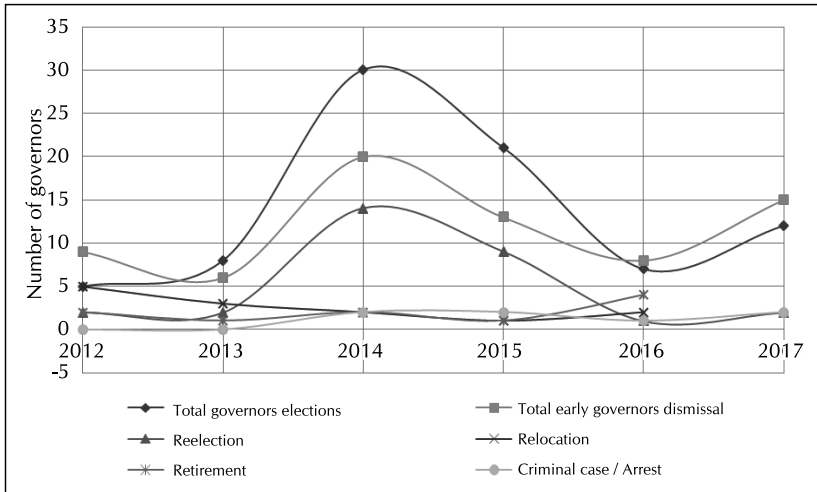
Figure 3 visualizes governor dismissal data and exit fates. Between 2004 and 2012 governors were appointed by the president, in late 2011 Medvedev had announced the reintroduction of gubernatorial elections that had been in place before 2004. On the one hand, the intention of this reform was to increase the legitimacy of regional heads of administration, on the other it was rather obvious that the PA was concerned with reducing the uncertainty related to electoral processes from the very beginning.<sup>34</sup>

One of the measures to assert central control was the introduction of United Voting Days which combined elections in several federal subjects. Another informal institution used has been the early dismissal of incumbent governors, which is usually accompanied by a presidential appointment to serve as interim governor until the next elections. This practice increases presidential leverage over governors; presidential endorsement also increases

<sup>34</sup> H. Blakkisrud, “Governing the Governors: Legitimacy vs. Control in the Reform of the Russian Regional Executive,” *East European Politics* 31, no. 1 (2015), pp. 104–121.

the legitimacy of interim governors in the eyes of the electorate, and with regard to potential competitors.

Figure 3. Gubernatorial elections and exit fate of governors in Putin's 3<sup>rd</sup> term. Only first quarter for 2017



Source: compiled by the author.

Figure 3 illustrates that, in 2014, almost 2/3 of gubernatorial elections were held after early presidential dismissals of governors. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova argues that this strategy was chosen “in order to use the patriotic momentum associated with the Crimea annexation (‘krymnash’ effect) and get re-elected before the negative impact of Western (and anti-Western) economic sanctions were felt in the regions.”<sup>35</sup> This Crimea effect was most noticeable in 2014 and 2015 when early dismissals were predominantly employed to safeguard the reelection of incumbent governors. In 2016 and early 2017, however, early dismissals were used to replace incumbents by new governors and therefore preempt election by “quasi-appointments.” 2014 and 2015 were thus more about cadre stability while 2016, and in particular 2017, mark a decided return to the principle of cadre rotation.

<sup>35</sup> G. Sharafutdinova, “Regional Governors Navigating through Putin’s Third Term,” *Russian Politics* 1, no. 4 (2016), p. 376.



This informal institution of early resignation certainly did not contribute to a heightened legitimacy of governors. Nevertheless, it would be an overstatement to argue that the stability trend in 2014 and 2015 was due to a “scarce gubernatorial cadre pool.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, only the strategy changed—electoral authoritarianism tweaked in order to guarantee an uneven playing field favoring the ruling elite. The appointments in early 2017 show, especially, that a new cohort of governors born in the 1960s and 1970s is about to replace an older one born in the 1940s and 1950s. Figure 3 also illustrates that among those who were eased out of their positions, arrests and criminal investigation were an exception: two detentions of governors in 2014, two in 2015, one in 2016, and two by April 2017 respectively—i.e. the predominant presidential strategy towards governors was an adaptive mixture of stability of cadres and rotation, not open repression.

#### DISMISSALS AND THE “FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION” IN RUSSIA

The ostentatious arrests of so-called “systemic liberals” like the arrest of Kirov’s governor, Nikita Belykh, in June 2016, or that of the Minister of Economic Development, Alexey Ulyukayev, in November 2016, sent shock waves through Russia’s political and economic elite. Was this the beginning of a new purge of remaining systemic liberals in Russia’s public administration, the start of a major shift in economic policy? After all, Ulyukayev had been one of the main pillars of monetary and economic policy under Putin when he had served as deputy finance minister, deputy chairman of the Central Bank; he was the 1<sup>st</sup> acting Minister in post-Soviet Russia to be arrested on charges of corruption. In the aftermath of such high profile arrests, usually a number of theories begin to circulate: was it a conflict between the government and Rosneft’s Sechin over the privatization of the oil company Bashneft in the case of Ulyukayev? Or the misappropriation of informal election funds in the case of Belykh? Court trials in such prominent cases can drag on for long time and the “rule by law”-logic usually

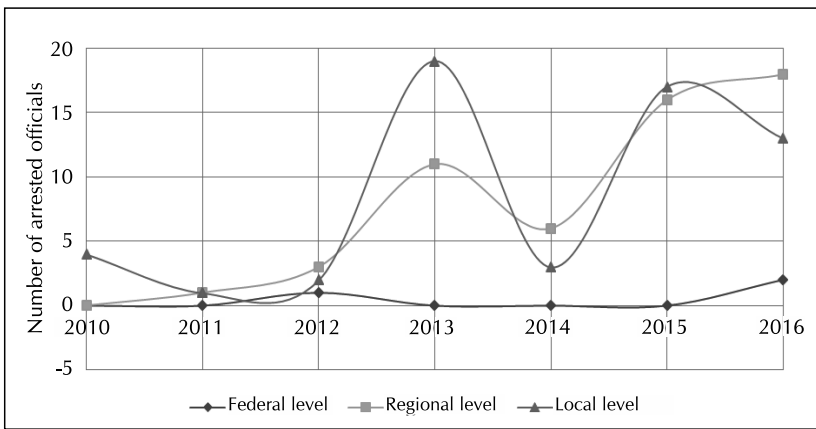
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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 382.

determines highly politicized cases, so it is more than difficult to determine the true motives behind the arrests.

The option that these arrests were instances of a systematic, consistent campaign against corruption should be excluded; this would undermine the basis upon which the current regime rests. Instead, it can be argued that graft and corruption are part of the “institutional mechanisms used to secure the loyalty and obedience of officials.”<sup>37</sup> Following this logic, widespread informal practices and corruption are accepted or even encouraged, so that subordinates in the administrative hierarchy can be blackmailed. Prosecution and punishment are suspended, and, as a rule, are meted out towards disobedient or even politically disloyal subordinates.

Figure 4. Officials arrested on corruption charges



Source: Based on a data bases collected<sup>39</sup> by means of media reporting on such cases.

Bearing in mind Russia's ongoing economic stagnation and the “Crimea consensus effect” potentially subsiding, one might indeed surmise that increased punishment and repression was needed to control the *administrativniki*—state officials in the

<sup>37</sup> K. Darden, “The Integrity of Corrupt States: Graft as an Informal State Institution,” *Politics & Society* 36, no. 1 (2008), p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

federal, regional and local administrations. To track the corruption-related arrests of bureaucrats over time, I use a data set collected by Dmitry Filonov and Anastasiya Yakoreva<sup>39</sup> and recoded it to allow for a differentiation of arrests on the three levels of administration.

Several trends can be observed. The first recent wave of arrests started already in 2013 and saw almost twice as many arrests of local officials than from regional administrations. Being a mayor is notoriously dangerous in Russia.<sup>40</sup> It is estimated that by 2007 every sixth acting mayor had either been in prison, is in prison or will likely wind up in prison, a development attributed to local conflicts around municipal land or real estate. In the first comprehensive academic paper on Russian mayors, it was found that between 2000 and 2012, "10% of elected mayors leave office under arrest, compared to 4% of appointed mayors."<sup>41</sup> Local officials had always been even more endangered. However, the persecution of governors, their deputies and regional cabinet ministers appears to be a fairly recent phenomenon; by 2016, the majority of arrests were largely of this type of official. So far, it seems to be too early to say whether regional and even federal civil servants have been increasingly persecuted by law enforcement, but the figures for 2016, at least, point in this direction. In 2014 and 2015, two governors were arrested on corruption charges while in 2016 one governor, one deputy minister and one minister (Ulyukayev) were put on trial. In the first quarter of 2017, already two governors (Savel'ev from the Republic of Udmurtiya and Markelov from the Republic of Marii-El) were taken into custody, a sign this trend is at the very least persisting. Seizures of high-ranking officials are usually planned and implemented by the Federal Security Service FSB and the Investigative Committee. Often both agencies work in tandem, and their increasingly prominent role during these arrests indicates that selective repression against a few officials is used to discipline the federal and regional executive as a whole.

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<sup>39</sup> D. Filonov, A. Yakoreva, "Vse protiv vseh. Kak sazhayut chinovnikov v Rossii," *Republic.ru*, 2016, <https://republic.ru/posts/76987>.

<sup>40</sup> V. Lebin et al., "Pochemu sazhayut merov?," *Expert.ru*, 2007, [http://expert.ru/russian\\_reporter/2007/02/pochemu\\_sazhayut\\_merov/](http://expert.ru/russian_reporter/2007/02/pochemu_sazhayut_merov/).

<sup>41</sup> N. Buckley et al., "Elections, Appointments, and Human Capital: The Case of Russian Mayors," *Demokratizatsiya* 22, no. 1 (2014), p. 111.

Often, a network of closely interconnected officials in one region is arrested all at once. This happened, most notably, in Voronezh in 2013, in Komi in 2015, and in Sakhalin, Perm, Kirov and Vladivostok in 2016. The annexation of Crimea added one more region where frequent arrests of officials were used to enforce federal control: 6 officials were captured on peninsula in 2015 and 3 in 2016. In this sense, for the federal center, Crimea became yet another problematic region. Officials there were persecuted at a higher rate than an average Russian region. Alleged purges of prominent officials such as Belykh and Ulyukaev should thus be seen in the context of this federal strategy of “discipline and punish and make an example”—while regional and local conflicts also contribute to a pressure from below on officials at that level.

#### RELATIVE POWERS OF THE PRESIDENT IN EXECUTIVE-LEGISLATIVE RELATIONS: VELOCITY AND VOTING PATTERNS IN THE DUMA

When Crimea was annexed, President Putin initiated three laws that were passed in the Russian State Duma with lightning speed. Their sole purpose was to formalize Crimea's status as a part of the Russian Federation.<sup>42</sup> All bills passed through the Duma with a majority of over 98%. Ilya Ponomarev, who was the only MP who voted against the accession of Crimea, was subsequently expelled from the Duma and is now living in exile. Several others abstained, but as Ponomarev has noted, high pressure was asserted to achieve a unanimous vote. Far more meaningful than the percentage voting

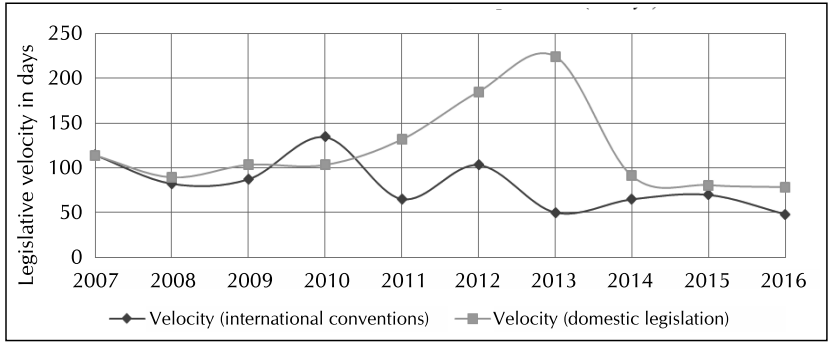
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<sup>42</sup> These three laws are: (1) *Zakonoprojekt № 475944-6 “O prinyatii v Rossiyskuyu Federatsiyu Respubliki Krym i obrazovanii v sostave Rossiyskoy Federatsii novykh sub”ektov—Respubliki Krym i goroda federal’nogo znacheniya Sevastopolya,”* initiated on 19 March 2014, <http://asozd2.duma.gov.ru/main.nsf/%28SpravkaNew%29?OpenAgent&RN=475944-6&02>; (2) *Zakonoprojekt № 475948-6 “O ratifikatsii Dogovora mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Respublikoy Krym o prinyatii v Rossiyskuyu Federatsiyu Respubliki Krym i obrazovanii v sostave Rossiyskoy Federatsii novykh sub”ektov,”* initiated on 19 March 2014, <http://asozd2.duma.gov.ru/main.nsf/%28SpravkaNew%29?OpenAgent&RN=475948-6&02>; (3) *Zakonoprojekt № 484131-6 “O prekrashchenii deystviya soglasheniy, kazayushchikhsya prebyvaniya Chernomorskogo flota Rossiyskoy Federatsii na territorii Ukrainy,”* initiated on 28 March 2014, <http://asozd2.duma.gov.ru/main.nsf/%28SpravkaNew%29?OpenAgent&RN=484131-6&02>.

in favor was the speed with which the bills passed the Duma and were signed by the president: the two bills on the accession of Crimea were rushed through in a record low of two days; the bill on the suspension of the Black Sea fleet agreement took just five days before it was promulgated.

Analogous to the presidential approval rating discussed above, this speedy, unanimous voting pattern begs the question if, and for how long, a potential Crimea effect persisted. Unanimous parliamentary votes and the pace of legislation are useful indicators assessing presidential power. As Paul Chaisty’s research has found, higher legislative velocity in particular is a robust way to view Russia’s authoritarian turn.<sup>43</sup> If there is a persistent sign of this after Crimea, that could also hint at further authoritarianism and a further shift of relative power towards the presidency.

Figure 5. Velocity of legislation initiated by the president measured in days between registration of the bill and presidential sign-off, the years indicate when the bills were initiated by the President. N= 407 bills



Source: data compiled by the author.

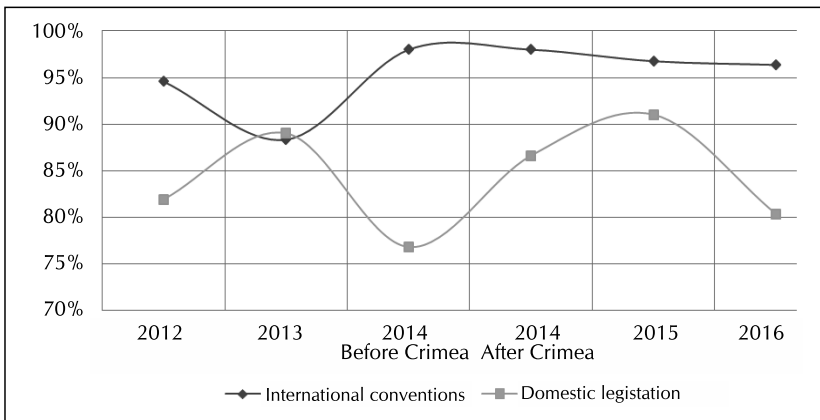
Figure 5 visualizes the velocity of all bills initiated by the president in the period between the two Duma terms from 2007 to September 2016. Quite strikingly, between 2007 and 2010 the speed of both domestic legislation and international conventions remained roughly equal averaging around 100 days per year.

<sup>43</sup> P. Chaisty, “Presidential Dynamics and Legislative Velocity in Russia, 1994–2007,” *East European Politics* 30, no. 4 (2014), pp. 588–601.

However, by 2013 domestic legislation took more than four times as long to make it into law. Backlogs suggest that major disagreements existed within the executive that delayed legislative policy making. After Crimea, the average annual velocity dropped below 100 days and almost converged for both domestic and international legislation. The “rally around the legislative leader” with Crimea effect is clearly substantial.

Once we turn to Duma voting results on presidential bills, a similar picture emerges. Especially in 2014, before the almost unanimous Crimea legislation, the voting rift between international and domestic legislation was almost 100 votes on average or 442 compared to 345.

Figure 6. Voting results in the Duma for all bills initiated by the president in Putin's 3<sup>rd</sup> term until the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duma convocation. N = 171 bills



Source: data compiled by the author.

While the United Russia faction would vote unanimously as a rule, at times mostly the Communist faction, a Just Russia, and on rare occasions the LDPR voted against or withheld their support for presidential initiatives. After Crimea, those of the nominal opposition would also rally around the “legislative leader,” and only on rare occasions the Communist faction would vote against. For instance, their opposition to a controversial anti-corruption legislation (Bill 664950-6). However, by 2016 the Crimea effect had markedly subsided, and on average, support for domestic

presidential bills dropped to 80%. Naturally, this does not mean that bill failures became likely. Nevertheless, with the looming Duma elections in September 2016, opposition factions—first and foremost the Communists—returned to their previous *modus operandi*: that is, signaling to their electorate that they sometimes differed from the mainstream. The Communists also used this option of voting against legislation as leverage with the PA. United Russia's landslide victory at recent parliamentary elections, where the party gained an unprecedented constitutional majority, suggests that this endeavor from the Communists largely failed. Nevertheless, the increased representation of the Russian regions could lead to a situation where "deputies will have more room for discussion on economic issues important to the regions, whereas they will present a united front on security and foreign policy."<sup>44</sup> More debate within the United Russia faction and increased bargaining with the regions will only be feasible, however, if no other international adventure akin to the annexation of Crimea causes another "rally around the legislative leader" effect.

## CONCLUSION

The chapter started with the intention to investigate how far the annexation of Crimea affected domestic politics in Russia, and more specifically several prominent dimensions of presidential power. To answer this question I proposed to carve up Putin's 3<sup>rd</sup> presidential term by means of a before/after research design to find out in how far Crimea was a critical juncture.

The findings bear implications both for our understanding of the annexation of Crimea on Russian domestic politics as well as of external shocks and critical junctures more generally. On the one hand, the effect of Crimea was consistent and protracted, both with regard to presidential approval ratings, velocity of law-making and to a lesser degree voting patterns in the Duma.

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<sup>44</sup> B. Noble, "Volodin's Duma," *Intersection*, 13 December 2016, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/politics/volodins-duma>.

On the other hand, for other dimensions of presidential power Crimea was less of a caesura: for appointments and dismissals of officials in the federal and regional executive electoral cycles and the cadre rotation principle were crucial determinants of presidential activism. What is more, a gradual increase in rare, punctual repressions suggests that the Crimea effect has been gradually subsiding and that for policy-making under an ever more constrained basis of resources, a “discipline and punish” approach is employed as a technique of administrative control. Corrupt practices at the core of the system, meanwhile, remain in place.

Crimea caused a “rally around the leader” effect both in terms of presidential approval ratings and legislative activity, and thus contributed to a more pronounced personalist form of authoritarian governance. But other key regime characteristics remained in place: non-competitive multi-party elections still perform important functions for the turnover of personnel in the state administration, and selective punishment of officials can be seen as a major instrument of governance. Crimea was thus both a trigger and an accelerator for domestic politics and presidential power in particular. On the other hand, slow-moving, more inert features allow the Russian regime to adapt cosmetically to external challenges, but even in the face of major external shocks, wholesale change of Russia's governance structures looks improbable.

*Fabian Burkhardt is a member of the Intersection's editorial board. He is a PhD candidate in comparative politics at University of Bremen's Research Centre of East European Studies. He is a resident fellow at the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin, and a member of the Graduate School for East and South East European Studies, Munich.*